

Play Therapy – A non-directive humanistic approach



This booklet is designed to help parents, primary carers and other allied health professionals get a better understanding of humanistic play therapy.

What is humanistic play therapy?



Humanistic play therapy is a therapy to help children communicate their feelings and thoughts through play. It is a space for children to explore and understand their world safely through toys and play. By creating a space of safety, acceptance and empathy a child can begin to communicate some of the difficulties they have been experiencing in life. Helping them unravel tangled feelings that have been causing them to struggle in certain areas of life (Axline, 1969). For children play is like a language and toys are like their words (Landreth, 2012). While we as adults often talk through our problems, troubles and more difficult moments, children will use play to express what is happening in their lives. This helps a child to communicate with others at their own time and pace, without the use of words and language, that at times will be beyond their developmental level (Axline, 1969).

Humanistic play therapy is non-directive, this means, that the child is allowed to play freely without direction from the therapist. This model holds a deep belief that children hold within themselves the direction towards positive growth and healing. Central to this, is the therapeutic relationship - when held in an accepting, warm and caring therapeutic relationship a child can access through play, hurts and areas of life they need to understand more fully (Axline, 1969, Landreth, 2012, Rogers, 1957).

Humanistic play therapy is a widely researched therapy, effective and developmentally appropriate for working with children with a wide variety of concerns. A few to mention are depression, grief, fear, anxiety, abuse, neglect, hospitalization, chronic illness, aggression, and more (Sweeney, & Landreth, 2011).



At the Heart of

Humanistic Play Therapy

- **The therapist is warm, caring towards the child. Genuinely interested in the child.**
- **The therapist accepts the child as they are, and does not wish them to be different.**
- **There is a feeling of safety and permissiveness in this relationship.**
- **The therapist is constantly sensitive to the child's feelings, and gently reflects those feelings to help a child gain more self-understanding.**
- **The Therapist holds the belief in the capacity of a child to act responsibly and to be able problem solve.**
- **The Therapist trusts the inner direction of the child, allowing the child to direct and lead the play and the relationship.**
- **The Therapist allows the therapy process to unfold naturally, not hurrying it at all.**
- **The use of therapeutic limits of keeping the child, therapist and toys safe, allows the child to accept personal and relationship responsibility.**

(Axline, 1969, Sweeney & Landreth, 2011)

Does my child need play therapy?

As parents and carers, we often feel concerned about how our children are coping with home and school. We may be feeling worried over their development, over areas of behaviour, or feelings of sadness, anger and distress.



Children sometimes will struggle with feelings that can lead to difficult behaviours and as carers we sometimes blame ourselves for these moments. Beginning this journey to help our loved ones is important and of great value (Cochrane et al, 2010). Children can often misinterpret events in their life, for example often when parents separate or divorce, a child can feel that this separation is somehow their fault. In play therapy a child can rework this experience with a trained therapist, gaining new clearer understandings, free of anxiety, fear and other difficult feelings (Landreth, 2012).

How can play therapy help?

Play is an essential and vital part of a child's development. Social, emotional, cognitive, physical, creativity and language are all helped in their developmental path through play (Elkind, 2007).



Through the emotional support of the therapeutic relationship, children can begin to create clearer understandings of their own thoughts and feelings. Through play children will play out life events, re-enacting more difficult life experiences. In the play therapy room with a trained play therapist children can begin to make more sense of these past experiences and develop coping strategies for the future (Axline, 1969, Landreth, 2012).

Research suggests play therapy can lead to a number of potential outcomes, it can raise self-esteem, reduce fears and anxiety, help children manage relationships with family and friends, while also helping with a child's general development (Ray et al, 2011).



What will happen in a play therapy session?



In the playroom, there will be a large selection of different types of toys, such as; arts and craft materials, an array of pretend play toys, dolls house, garage set, dress up toys, sand trays and more (Landreth, 2003, Vanfleet et al, 2010). The therapist will facilitate a child to play and express himself in anyway the child desires. The only limits will be the safety of the child and the therapist, and keeping the toys and room from being damaged (Landreth, 2002).

Why is the relationship with the therapist important?



The therapist is important in creating the right conditions, of safety, acceptance and empathy that allow a child to feel safe to express any of their feelings and thoughts (Cochran et al, 2010). It is through the therapeutic relationship that a child will begin to explore more difficult feelings. With the warmth, understanding and care from the therapist a child can start to gain more personal understanding of their thoughts and feelings. (Landreth, 2012).

What will the therapist do?



Initially the therapist will seek to understand your concerns for your child and family. In understanding the stresses your child and family have been through a therapist will help your child make more sense of difficult moments. A therapist will assess the strengths and weaknesses of your child, and gain insight into some of their difficulties. They might wish to gain more information from other professionals such as teachers involved in your child's life (Cochran et al, 2010). The therapist would seek permission from parents or carers to be able to gain this information.

A therapist through having been trained in understanding a child's play and important theories in child development, will use their skills in understanding play and what play communicates to help a child gain further understanding into their own thoughts and feelings (Cochrane et al, 2010, Landreth, 2012, Axline, 1969). The therapist will keep all information regarding your family confidential, at times it might be beneficial to share some areas of information with other professional, but the therapist will always ask permission to share any information. A therapist must share information if they have knowledge that a child is in harms way, harming themselves or others (Wilson & Ryan, 2005). At progress meeting a therapist will invite the child to share facts around their play with their parents or carers, and will honour the child's response to this request (Wilson & Ryan, 2005). This allows for a relationship of trust to develop between the child and the therapist.

How long will the therapy take?

This can vary depending on the need of the child. It can be short-term with as little as 12 play sessions. But with more complex problems a long-term therapy might be more appropriate, this would be dependant of the needs of the child and family (Cochran et al, 2010). For establishing a trusting relationship, once a week sessions on the same time, day and space are important (Cochran et al, 2010, Landreth, 2012).



What is my role? How can I help my child?

As the parent or primary carer your role is very important in your child's therapy. You can help in the following ways (Cochran et al, 2010);



- 1. Encourage regular attendance.**
- 2. Try not to ask questions of what happens in the sessions, as your child might still be working out what they are playing.**
- 3. In therapy a child can express whatever they need to express, so asking them to be good in the sessions will only limit this important expression.**
- 4. Children will explore the play sessions in their own time, so it is best not to ask them to tell the therapist about anything specific.**
- 5. During therapy some problems the child may be experiencing may get worse for a period, feel free to contact your child's therapist with any concerns you might have throughout the process.**
- 6. Old clothes are best, as play can get messy at times.**



This booklet was designed to help parents, primary carers and other health professionals gain a greater understanding of the process of humanistic play therapy. For further information please see the reference list below or contact your local play therapist.

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